



MIKE DAVIS 2022-03-11

THANATOS TRIUMPHANT

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Does hegemony require a grand design? In a world where a thousand gilded oligarchs, billionaire sheiks, and Silicon deities rule the human future, we should not be surprised to discover that greed breeds reptilian minds. What I find most remarkable about these strange days – as thermobaric bombs melt shopping malls and fires rage in nuclear reactors – is the inability of our

supermen to validate their power in any plausible narrative of the near future.

By all accounts, Putin, who surrounds himself with as much astrology, mysticism and perversion as the terminal Romanovs, sincerely believes that he must save the Ukrainians from being Ukrainians lest the celestial destiny of the Rus becomes impossible. The present must be smashed in order to make an imaginary past the future.

Far from the arch-strongman and master-deceiver admired by Trump, Orbán and Bolsonaro, Putin is simply ruthless, impetuous and prone to panic. The people in the streets of Kiev and Moscow who laughed away the threat until the missiles started falling, were naive only in expecting that no rational leader would sacrifice the 21st-century Russian economy to raise a faux double-eagle over the Dnieper.

Indeed, no rational leader would.

On the other shore, Biden conducts a nonstop seance with Dean Acheson and all the ghosts of Cold Wars past. The White House is visionless in the wilderness it helped to create. All the think tanks and genius minds that supposedly guide the Clinton-Obama wing of the Democratic Party are in their own way as lizard-brained as the soothsayers in the Kremlin. They can't imagine any other intellectual framework for declining American power than nuclear-tipped competition with Russia and China. (One could almost hear the sigh of relief as Putin lifted the mental burden of having to think global strategy in the Anthropocene). In the end, Biden has turned out to be the same warmonger in power that we feared Hilary Clinton would be. Although Eastern Europe now distracts, who can doubt Biden's determination to seek confrontation in the South China Sea – waters far more dangerous than the Black Sea?

Meanwhile the White House seems to have almost casually chucked its weak commitment to progressivism into the trash. A week after the most frightening report in history, one that implied the coming decimation of poor humanity, climate change rated nary a mention in the State of the Union. (How could it compare to the transcendental urgency of rebuilding NATO?) And Trayvon Martin and George Floyd are now just roadkill rapidly vanishing from sight in the rear-view mirror of the presidential limousine as Biden rushes around reassuring the cops that he's their best friend.

But this is not simply a betrayal: the US Left bears its own share of responsibility for the dismal outcome. Almost none of the energies generated by Occupy, BLM and the Sanders campaigns were channelled into rethinking global issues and framing a renewed politics of solidarity. Equally there has been no generational replenishment of the radical mindpower (I.F. Stone, Isaac Deutscher, William Appleman Williams, D.F. Fleming, John Gerassi, Gabriel Kolko, Noam Chomsky... to name just a few) that was once focused laser-like on US foreign policy.

Nor has the EU for its part conquered the problems of epochal characterization and the foundations of a new geopolitics. Having hitched its star to trade with China and natural gas from Russia, Germany in particular risks spectacular disorientation. The milquetoast coalition in Berlin is ill-equipped, to say the least, to find an alternative path to prosperity. Likewise, Brussels, even if

temporarily reanimated by the Russian peril, remains the capital of a failed super-state, a union that has been unable to collectively manage the migration crisis, the pandemic, or the strongmen in Budapest and Warsaw. An expanded NATO entrenched behind a new Eastern wall is a cure worse than the disease.

Everyone is quoting Gramsci on the interregnum, but that assumes that something new will be or could be born. I doubt it. I think what we must diagnose instead is a ruling class brain tumour: a growing inability to achieve any coherent understanding of global change as a basis for defining common interests and formulating large-scale strategies.

In part this is the victory of pathological presentism, making all calculations on the basis of short-term bottom-lines in order to allow the super-rich to consume all the good things of the earth within their lifetimes. (Michel Aglietta in his recent *Capitalisme: Le temps des ruptures* emphasises the unprecedented character of the new sacrificial generational divide.) Greed has become radicalized to the extent that it no longer needs political thinkers and organic intellectuals, just Fox News and bandwidth. In the worst-case scenario, Elon Musk will simply lead a billionaire migration off planet.

It also may be the case that our rulers are blind because they lack the penetrating eyesight of revolution, bourgeois or proletarian. A revolutionary era may dress itself in costumes of the past (as Marx articulates in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*), but it defines itself by recognizing the possibilities for societal reorganization arising from new forces of technology and economics. In the absence of external revolutionary consciousness and the threat of insurrection, old orders do not produce their own (counter-)visionaries.

(Let me note, however, the curious example of the speech that Thomas Piketty gave on 16 February at the Pentagon's National Defense University. As part of a regular series of talks on 'Responding to China', the French economist argued that 'the West' must challenge Beijing's rising hegemony by abandoning its 'dated hyper-capitalist model' and promoting instead a 'new emancipatory egalitarian horizon on a global scale'. A strange venue and pretext, to say the least, for advocating democratic socialism.)

Nature meanwhile is taking back the reins over history, making its own titanic compensations, at the expense of powers, especially over natural and engineered infrastructures, that empires once thought to control. In this light, the 'Anthropocene' with its hint of the promethean, seems especially ill-fitted to the reality of apocalyptic capitalism.

As an objection to my pessimism, one might claim that China is clear-sighted where everyone else is blind. Certainly, its vast vision of a unified Eurasia, the Belt and Road project, is a grand design for the future, unequalled since the sun of the 'American Century' rose over a war-shattered world. But China's genius, 1949-59 and 1979-2013, has been its neo-mandarin practice of collective leadership, centralized but plurivocal. Xi Jinping, in his ascent to Mao's throne, is the worm in the apple. Although he has economically and militarily enhanced China's clout, his reckless unleashing of ultra-nationalism could yet open a nuclear Pandora's Box.

We are living through the nightmare edition of 'Great Men Make History'. Unlike the high Cold War when politburos, parliaments, presidential cabinets and general staffs to some extent countervailed megalomania at the top, there are few safety switches between today's maximum leaders and Armageddon. Never has so much fused economic, mediatic and military power been put into so few hands. It should make us pay homage at the hero graves of Aleksandr Ilyich Ulyanov, Alexander Berkman and the incomparable Sholem Schwarzbard.

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